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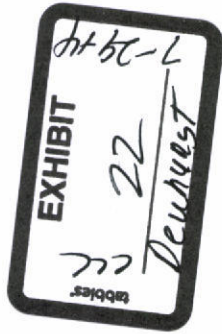
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Dewhurst on hot seat in Houston debate

BY PATRICIA KILDAY HART, HOUSTON CHRONICLE · SEPTEMBER 16, 2013

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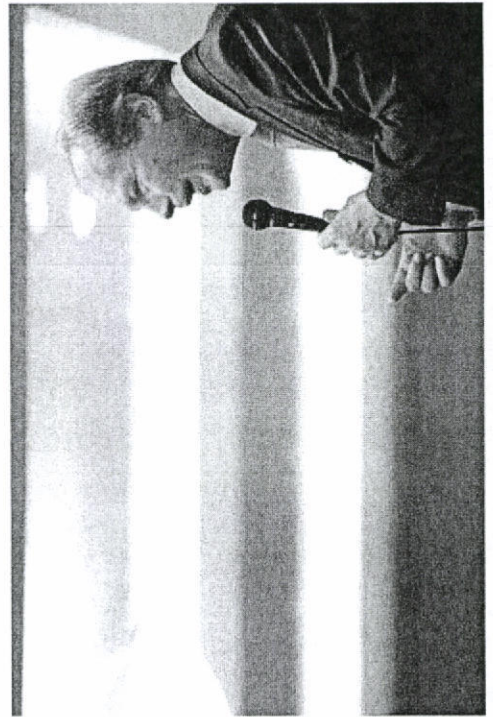
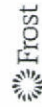


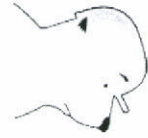
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Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, defending his job, says taxes have been cut "50 times" since he took office.



During his first public encounter with three Republican challengers, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst on Monday spent an uncomfortable hour in Houston defending his 10-year record against assertions he allowed Democrats and "mob rule" to thwart the passage of conservative legislation.

In a debate sponsored by Houston's Ronald Reagan Republican Women's Club, Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, said missteps by Dewhurst permitted Fort Worth Democrat Wendy Davis to nearly derail abortion regulations with a filibuster in June that could have been prevented.

"Wendy Davis should never have had the floor that day," Patrick said. "There are many ways we could have stopped that from happening."

Though Davis blocked passage of the bill only temporarily, Patrick blamed the theatrics surrounding the legislation on "a lack of planning, a lack of leadership, a lack of vision." He said he decided to challenge Dewhurst after a shouting crowd in the gallery temporarily halted Senate work in late June.

"As lieutenant governor, I will not ever let mob rule take over the Senate," he said.

Added another challenger, Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples: "You don't go out to eat and drink with lobbyists when there are issues on the floor of the Senate that you are supposed to be dealing with. There are five months to deal with those issues. ... It's about getting there early and slaying there late."

Dewhurst defended his handling of the controversy, saying he deferred to the majority of the Republican caucus that did not want to break the Senate tradition of permitting a filibuster. Noting that he ultimately earned the endorsement of the state's major anti-abortion groups, he said, "We broke the filibuster. We passed that bill."

The legislation bans abortions past 20 weeks of pregnancy and requires the procedure to be performed in ambulatory surgical centers, a requirement that abortion rights activists predicted will shutter clinics across Texas.

Monday's sometimes-tense debate drew upon questions selected at random from the audience, which included many local Republican officials. The audience gave polite applause to all four candidates, saving its most enthusiastic response to the prediction from Patrick that Davis will be defeated next election whether she runs for re-election to the Senate or for governor, as widely speculated.

Dewhurst reminded the conservative crowd of other highly partisan issues he passed, such as Voter ID. "You think that was easy? That was a blood bath," he said. "We had to change the rules. We had to fight the Democrats."

He also said taxes have been cut "50 times," including a \$7 billion local property tax cut, since he took office. "I want to come back and cut 'em even more," he said.

Patrick claimed that Democrats have been allowed to block legislation on sanctuary cities and school choice largely because Dewhurst has given them too much power.

"I will not appoint half of the Democrats as chairman of committees," he said.

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Dewhurst responded that Democrats led only five of 17 Senate committees and assured the crowd that none of them was important.

Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, also vying for Dewhurst's job, criticized the Legislature's handling of transportation funding, saying the state's debt for highway construction has skyrocketed in the last decade from \$5 billion to about \$30 billion.

"The Legislature seeks to go home every June to tell you 'We did not raise your taxes,' but what the Legislature has done is raise your children's and grandchildren's taxes" by incurring debt, Patterson said. He suggested earmarking the vehicle sales tax for transportation funding.

While all four candidates endorsed the constitutional amendment tapping the economic stabilization fund — also known as the rainy day fund — for water projects, they all pledged to hold the line on spending.

The four candidates also offered similar visions of limited government. At one point, Patterson suggested light-heartedly that the federal Endangered Species Act protected "critters that ought to die anyway."

"I mean — the blind salamander?" Patterson said. "How long are we gonna let that little bugger last?"

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BY PATRICIA KILDAY HART, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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